

Bangkok from 2005 to 2014 : The Politics of Protest

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“This government has to go” has been a constant theme in Thailand since the election of Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister in 2001. This theme, however, is not the banner of just one side of the ongoing political struggles, but rather a theme used by both sides of the conflict when they sit in opposition to the current power holders. These two sides are often characterized as “bangkok elite” versus “poor farmers” or “yellow” versus “red”. This article will examine the chronology of these protests from 2005 to 2014 while also reconsidering clarity of the division of the two sides.

Key Words : Thailand, Protests, Bangkok, Politics

Overview

During my most recent trip to Bangkok, Thailand in December of 2013, while I was waiting to disembark the Thai Airways A380 which had carried me from Japan, the cabin attendant near me engaged me in conversation asking in which part of the country I was planning to stay. “I am heading south” I responded to which she stated I should avoid Bangkok. The door to the gate opened and as the line of passengers started to move she added a final comment “this government has to go”.

“This government has to go” has been a constant theme in Thailand since the election of Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister in 2001. This theme, however, is not the banner of just one side of the ongoing political struggles, but rather a theme used by both sides of the conflict when they sit in opposition to the current power holders. These two sides are often characterized as “bangkok elite” versus “poor farmers” or “yellow” versus “red”. This article will examine the chronology of these protests from 2005 to 2014.

The People's Alliance for Democracy and the Democratic Party

On each side of the ongoing conflict are two elements: a formal political party and a political activist group often at the center of the demonstrations

seen in Bangkok since 2005. The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) is the political activist group. Supporters of the PAD are often described as middle and upper class people in Bangkok, supporters of the Monarchy, the army and Southerners. Members of PAD have adopted yellow as their official color and often dress in yellow leading to the nickname “yellow shirts”. The color yellow also represents the king and is a further indication of the group pro-monarch stance.

The Democratic Party is a conservative political party tracing its origins back to the 1940s and the formal political wing of the PAD. The support base of the Democratic Party, similar to the PAD, includes the southern parts of Thailand and Bangkok. The platform of the party is the continuation of a constitutional monarchy.

The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship and the Pheu Thai Party

On the other side of the political divide is the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) and the Pheu Thai Party (PTP). The UDD is a political activist group formed after a military coup ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. The support base of the UDD is the rural area out side of Bangkok particularly in the North and East of the country. While the Buddhist order has traditionally been a conservative pro-monarchy group

a growing number of Buddhist monks have also aligned with or have shown sympathy for the UDD in contrast to their normal conservative character (see McCargo, 2012). Red has been adopted as the official color of the UDD leading to the nickname “red shirts”.

The Pheu Thai Party (PTP) is the current political party of the UDD. It was founded in 2008, but has roots in two earlier political parties. The earliest of these, the Thai Rak Party (TRT), was originally the party of Thaksin Shinawatra when he served as prime minister. After the military coup in 2006, an investigation of the TRT, found electoral irregularities leading to the abolishment of the party in 2007. Members of the party who were not banned from politics for five years joined the People’s Power Party (PPP) in order to contest the Democratic Party for power in the general election held after the coup. The PPP was also abolished in 2008 after claims of vote buying leading to the formation of the Pheu Thai Party in 2008. The current “caretaker” Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra is a member of the PTP.

2005

Thaksin Shinawatra was elected Prime Minister in 2001, with an electoral victory by the TRT. Thaksin a wealthy businessman is from Chang Mai in the north of the country and outside of the more traditional circles of power located in Bangkok. Thaksin also served as a police officer. His outsider position, to some, seemed to be a chance for fresh politics with the government. He courted traditional centers of power such as the monarchy, but these were often described as only serving his interest. In the early 1990s he had donated money to support projects favored by the Queen and it has been suggested that he was attempting to play parts of the monarchy against each other (Handley, 2006). The image of Thaksin as anti-monarchy drew strong reactions from more conservative circles and during 2005 image troubles continued for Thaksin.

The Buddhist order within Thailand has been viewed as an institution firmly supporting the monarchy. With the rise of the red shirt movement this line has not been as clear with some within the order showing more red-leaning tendencies. These tendencies have also been fluid. The newspaper Manager Daily published a speech by the Buddhist monk Luang Ta Maha Bua in 2005 concerning the prime minister. The speech was critical of Thaksin accusing him of planning to get rid of the monarchy. Since monks are a respected part of Thai society

Thaksin could not take direct action against Luang Ta Maha Bua so instead Thaksin took the newspaper to court where he won damages. The fallout was costly to Thaksin as his adversaries used the incident to show Thaksin as trying to suppress free speech and control the press. These troubles would continue into 2006.

2006

Shin Corporation was a large conglomerate founded by Thaksin Shinawatra in the 1980s. In January 2006, members of the Shinawatra family including the prime minister sold their shares in the company making a large profit. This sale became a large issue within Thailand for several reasons. First laws about selling certain industries had just been changed allowing the sale to a Singaporean company. The law had changed during Thaksin’s time as prime minister. There was also a question of a lack of paid capitol gains taxes on the sale.

The PAD seized the opportunity to show Thaksin as self-serving when he should be leading the country. He was also selling out his country to foreign powers. Protests started in January and grew in February eventually leading Thaksin to call for elections to be held in April.

The call for elections only did not placate opposition groups who saw the prime minister as corrupt, but also leading a party which outnumbered the conservative voting elements of society. The PAD and other groups appealed to the King and requested royal intervention. It was hoped that King Bhumibol Adulyadej would move to resolve the crisis by appointing a royal interim prime minister. This did not happen.

As demonstrations intensified, the army chief, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, denied any plans for a military intervention in the crisis. Official statements were made in February and again in March of 2006. In September military units loyal to the army chief moved to oust Thaksin Shinawatra from power, by seizing key parts of the city and arresting members of the government loyal to the prime minister. Thaksin was out of the country attending a U.N. meeting in New York City when the coup happened. On September 21, 2006 the Reform Council issued a statement:

There has been social division like never before. Each side has been trying to conquer another with all possible means and the situation tends to intensify with growing doubts on the administration amid widespread reported corruption.

State units and independent organizations have been politically meddled, and not able to deliver their services as specified in the constitution.

The administration is also bordering on “lest majest” actions against the revered King. Despite attempts from social units for compromises, there is no way to end the conflicts.

The revolutionary body thus needs to seize power. We have no intention to rule but to return power to the people as soon as possible, to preserve peace and honour the King who is the most revered to all Thais.

(Statement from the Administrative Reform Council, 2006)

In the aftermath of the military coup, the PAD disbanded citing the accomplishment of their goal with the ouster of Thaksin Shinawatra. On the other side, the UDD was formed to protest the military coup against an elected government.

2007

Following the coup, the TRT was banned so eligible members moved to the People's Power Party to contest the Democratic Party in general elections scheduled to be held to establish a new government in 2007. Still holding a large voting block the Thaksin leaning People's Power Party came into power. Samak Sundaravej was elected the new prime minister.

2008

Due to the election of a group considered to be affiliated with the recently deposed Thaksin Shinawatra, the PAD reformed and started demonstrating against the new government. These demonstrations only intensified when the courts ruled Prime Minister Samak had violated the law by receiving income from another job while serving as prime minister.

Both sides entrenched their positions. Prime Minister Samak refused to resign and removed police who were considered too soft on the protesters. PAD increased its efforts by blocking more roads within Bangkok and by occupying Government House which is the seat of power for the Thai government. Prime Minister Samak was forced to step up temporary offices to conduct business.

In September, Samak was removed from office

due to his secondary income violations. A vote by the national assembly elected another member of the People's Power Party, Somchai Wongsawat as the new prime minister. Somchai is Thaksin's brother-in-law.

To make matters worse for the government, when a leader of the People's Power Party was convicted of vote buying the court ordered the People's Power Party was abolished. Some leaders of the PPP were banned from politics for five years. One member of this banned group was Somchai; he had lasted only 84 days in office. Former members of the PPP formed the Pheu Thai Party and the court appointed a new prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, from the Democratic Party. Demonstrations by the UDD started in April of 2009 against this new government.

2010

A court decision related to the Shin Corporation sale resulted in the seizing of some of Thaksin's assets and the assets of some of his family members. He responded, from his self-imposed exile overseas claiming the courts were also involved with an illegal power grab from an elected government. The UDD planned demonstrations in Bangkok for March in order to call for new elections. The government of Prime Minister Abhisit strengthened security measures within the city. Initially the demonstrations by the UDD were peaceful, but the situation gradually deteriorated. A number of bombings occurred and by April a state of emergency was declared. The army was finally called in and force was used to break up the demonstrations which included barricades defended by members of the UDD. Over 90 people were killed and the aftermath that followed saw numerous buildings including a shopping center in Bangkok set on fire.

2011-2013

In July 2011 general elections were again held and again the political affiliate of the UDD, this time Pheu Thai Party, won. Yingluck Shinawatra was elected prime minister. Yingluck has not been previously involved in politics. She is Thailand's first female prime minister and she is also the younger sister of Thaksin Shinawatra.

Investigations into the 2010 crackdown on the UDD demonstrations by the military began and murder charges were discussed for former Prime Minister Abhisit. An Amnesty Bill, however, was submitted to the parliament to protect the former Prime Minister with a rider which would have

also provided Thaksin Shinawatra with amnesty concerning the charges leveled against him.

Fearing a return of Thaksin and seeing the current Prime Minister as simply a puppet for her brother the PAD moved. Protesters occupied several government buildings in Bangkok. They cut power to some buildings and surrounded others. In some cases violence erupted between the protesters and the police. In response the army made a statement asking for restraint by the police. In one clash between the police and protestors army medics were seen helping injured protestors. In November the UDD moved to counter-protests and show their support for the government. Violence soon erupted between the two opposing groups resulting in death. The UDD quickly ended the counter-protests. The UDD stated "in order to avoid further complicating the situation for the government, we have decided to let the people return home" (Red-shirt leaders end rally, 2013) leaving the PAD in-control of the streets.

2014

From January 2014, the protests against the government intensified with a campaign to "occupy Bangkok" calling on protesters to move into Bangkok and setup more permanent demonstrations in key intersections of the city. These occupation sites have been set up with food service, medical assistance, and barricades with a security force guarding the entrances. At the center of these sites is usually a stage used not only for political speeches by protest leaders, but also for entertainers and musicians to perform.

Old rivalries continue within these protests. After a hand grenade was thrown towards the leader of these current protests, Suthep Thaugsuban, protest members blocked the police from investigating the site. They did, however, allow members of the army access to the site to conduct an investigation. With corruption charges now being filed against Prime Minister Yingluck over a rice purchasing plan, the occupation of Bangkok continues, the police oppose the demonstrations in a restrained manner in order to not provoke the army, while the PAD appeals to the King for royal intervention and the appointment of a royal caretaker government. Sensing a repeat of the past the PAD attempted to disrupt new elections in 2014. Two politically active groups, one with support from the police and the other from the army and both representing different demographics within the country seem to be caught in a repeating cycle of demonstrations. Unless common ground can be found this cycle may repeat for some time to come.

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